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ABSTRACT

This paper explores ways in which the press influences the generation and implementation of education policy. An associated purpose was to conceptualize an education policy that incorporates the media's role. The paper is divided into four parts. First, it outlines the details of the research design and the conceptual framework for the study. It then offers a brief account of the structure of the British media which affects interaction between media professionals and frequent sources. Third, the findings are discussed, which portray how media professionals and frequent sources interact in pursuing an interest common to their group but whose guiding values and sophistication of approach are contingent on contextual factors. Examples of such interactions reveal how the interest of media professionals and frequent sources may be harmonious or conflictual according to the situation. Finally, a question is raised over the consequences of this sometimes symbiotic, sometimes parasitic, relationship as regards the quality of the education policy process. Symbiotic interaction occurred when both partners pursued the elements of their group interest within the area of overlap. Parasitic interaction resulted when one partner pursued some portion of the group interest that was incompatible with that of the other partner. (Contains 23 references.) (RJM)

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Mutual Parasitism and Symbiosis: Interaction between Media Professionals and Sources with a Stake in Education Policy

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Mutual Parasitism and Symbiosis: Interaction between Media Professionals and Sources with a Stake in Education Policy

Introduction

How do citizens, including education professionals such as academics, know as much as they do about national and local government education policy and what is going on in schools, colleges and universities? Some knowledge about the local education scene may come from first hand experience, but the chances are that most information about the local and national - and even international - education system levels is gleaned from the output of the mass media (principally television, radio and the press), perhaps supplemented by the occasional pamphlet or circular from central government or from other sources such as professional associations. We live increasingly in what C Wright Mills called 'second hand worlds' (Said 1981), relying ever more heavily on the media to inform us about what is happening outside the realm of our first hand experience but which nevertheless shapes our everyday existence. Media output helps to frame our perceptions of current social, political and educational issues and how they may be resolved.

Over recent decades, the mass media have become a dominant feature in the political communication process that moulds the views of politicians and voters alike (Seymour-Ure 1974; Jones and Kavanagh 1994). Many media organisations are becoming internationalised, increasingly sharing programmes and editorial concerns, standards of output, and ownership (Negrine 1994). On the face of it, the media appear to be part and parcel, not only of the education policy process within each country, but also of the international exchange of ideas and experience between them, through mutual 'policy borrowing'.

Surprisingly perhaps, scholarly accounts of the educational policy process in the UK have underplayed the media role (eg Kogan 1975; Dale 1989; Bowe and Ball 1992; Ball 1994) possibly since, officially, the media act primarily as a communication channel for the messages of politicians and members of other groups, like teacher union representatives, who constitute major sources of media stories about education. Other studies have tended to concentrate on particular groups with a stake in education policy such as politicians, intellectuals, civil servants, or unions and professional associations (eg Lawton 1984; Lawrence 1992).

By contrast, extensive investigation of the relationship between the mass media and politics more generally suggests that the media amount to rather more than a channel for communicating others' messages. Media output contributes, unofficially, to the policy process through selective coverage and interpretation of events by media professionals like journalists and programme makers. Their values, including 'news values' (Galtung and Ruge 1973) about what makes a story newsworthy, lead to a consistent bias or 'refraction' (Lang and Lang 1984) in media output.

There has been little research focusing directly on the link between the mass media and the education policy process, despite our everyday experience of the centrality of the media in communicating among groups concerned with the formulation of education policy and between them and the voting public. What little has been done has focused mainly on media output, whether the ideological underpinnings of newspaper political cartoons (Warburton and Saunders 1996) or inconsistency in reporting of a policy issue in the 'quality' national press (Pettigrew and MacLure 1997). The process that culminates in such media output and its recursive impact on policy makers and the wider public remain virtually unaddressed, with the exception of a television journalist's insider account highlighting how media professionals' interests can result in biased education reporting (Baker 1994).

The research to be discussed in this paper was an exploratory investigation with a broader compass, examining how the press and broadcasting influence the generation and implementation of education policy. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust from October 1993 to May 1995, it was designed to examine how potential sources and media professionals routinely interact, whether through overt or covert, direct or indirect means; whether media professionals contribute to media messages originating with their sources; the extent to which they act as gatekeepers over selection of messages to convey; and the impact of these messages

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on politicians, education professionals and other groups centrally concerned with education policy.

An associated aim was to build towards a conception of education policy which incorporates the media role. Much relevant theory development has been undertaken in media studies, and there is significant convergence between pluralist and neo-Marxist perspectives within the hitherto largely separate fields of media and education policy (Wallace 1993, 1995). The research took this parallel development as its starting point.

The purpose of this paper is to report selected findings and aspects of the conceptualisation arising from this research which elaborate the linkage between media professionals working for national press and broadcasting organisations and their more frequently used sources concerned with national education policy. The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. First, details of the research design are given and the conceptual framework for the study is outlined. Second, a brief account is given of the structure of the British media which affects interaction between media professionals and frequent sources. Third, findings are discussed which portray how media professionals and frequent sources interact in pursuing an interest common to their group but whose guiding values and sophistication of approach are contingent on contextual factors. Examples of interaction reveal how the interests of media professionals and frequent sources may be harmonious or confictual according to the situation. Finally, in conclusion, a question is raised over the consequence of this sometimes symbiotic, sometimes mutually parasitic relationship for the quality of the education policy process.

Investigating Media-Source Interaction

Research Design

One focus for the empirical work was the relationship between media professionals working at the national level and their major sources. This relationship was investigated through 25 semi-structured interviews with 13 media professionals (ten national daily or weekly newspaper journalists, of whom eight were education specialists, plus two national broadcast producers and a TV education correspondent); nine frequent sources (three national politicians with an education brief, three national teacher union representatives, two university professors and a local government chief education officer); and two media officers and a person who used to be a senior civil servant in the central government Department for Education (DFE). (The terms of reference for this institution have since been broadened; it is now known as the Department of Education and Employment.) Supporting material was gathered by monitoring selected national media and source output throughout 1994, forming an archive of recorded broadcasts (including 116 education policy linked items on the evening news on the two main TV channels), newspaper cuttings (such as those referring to leaks of information), and other documents (like central government education department media releases).

Analysis of interviews was informed by techniques developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Research questions were derived from a literature review and the initial conceptual framework, to which the interview questions related. Interviews were tape recorded and summary tapes prepared by referring to fieldnotes and interview schedules, which were then transcribed. Media output and other documents were scanned according to the research questions, and content analysis (Weber 1990) of the education items from the evening TV news was carried out to determine the relative exposure of different sources. Matrices were developed to display interview and documentary data.

The theoretical orientation rests on middle ground which may be discerned between pluralist and neo-Marxist theoretical developments in the domains of politics, education policy, and the media and politics. Despite their differences, these approaches share some degree of acknowledgement of the 'relative autonomy' existing between major institutions (or patterns of relationships between groups) in society: the capitalist economy, the state (central government and its agencies, including publicly funded schools and colleges), education (teaching and the content of student learning), and the media. This concept embraces the possibility of a range of practices insofar as these institutions are independent, while pointing to the boundaries of this variety following from the degree to which they are also mutually dependent.

Formal education exists partly to supply the compliant and skilled workforce of the future to a capitalist economy. The state is dependent on the economy as the source of its income through taxation and borrowing, but a range of policies may be followed within broad limits imposed by the need for finance. Dale (1986) has argued that relative autonomy between the economy and the state enables different groups to impact on education policy, although a small number have greatest control over the education policy process. Education policy contributes to creating conditions which are not inimical to capitalism, legitimate capitalism, and in most cases actually assist in capital accumulation. In recent years UK central government education reforms have become more explicitly linked to the aim of enhancing wealth creation by improving economic performance in the face of global competition.

Most media organisations operating in the UK are multinational businesses in private ownership whose proprieters and employees work to accumulate capital by competing against each other within the capitalist economy. Media professionals must serve their primary interest (the fulfilment of their purposes) in securing a mass audience, whose members purchase media output and also provide the basis for securing advertising revenue (Postman and Powers 1992). Yet audiences are free to choose whether to attend to particular media output. A similar media interest exists for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) because, despite being a state owned but formally independent public service, high audience ratings must be achieved over time if it is to receive continued central government controlled funding. Media professionals must therefore both attract and entertain their target audience through coverage that will be deemed worth reading, watching or hearing. Media coverage of education policy related matters is directed towards some niche in the audience market, whether parents, politicians or education professionals, for which various sources of stories are required.

Relative Autonomy between the Media and Publicly Funded Education

Media professionals depend on different sources connected with the world of education. The more frequent sources, like central government ministers, are of perennial significance. They are generally 'media-wise': they are familiar with the way media professionals operate, and know how to interact with them to maximise their chance of getting the coverage they want. Others, like teachers in any particular school, may be of only fleeting value for a particular story and may be more 'media-naive'.

Those acting as sources vary equally in their dependence on media professionals. Central government politicians are the major initiators of education policies, but these policies have to be steered past politicians from parties in opposition to government and implemented by teachers in schools and by lecturers in colleges and universities. Ultimately, they must become accepted by a majority of voters, who include parents and older students. To the extent that central government politicians and other groups with a stake in education policy can use the media to relay their messages to education professionals and the wider public, positive media coverage is of enduring and critical importance to them. Reciprocally, the groups centrally concerned with education policy may be informed through monitoring media output about public perceptions of existing policies or the need for changes. Variation in degrees of mutual dependence between media professionals and other groups leads to an 'oligarchic tendency' in their interaction. Some, such as central government politicians, easily achieve exposure (though not always of a positive kind) while others, like education researchers, find it much harder to gain media coverage.

In western democracies where the media have formal independence from government, media professionals may legitimately serve their own journalistic interest first and foremost. The story that will most entice their target audience may be highly critical of particular sources, especially those, like central government politicians, who are highly dependent on securing positive media coverage. For though media professionals depend on frequent sources for information, they also have a 'licence to thrill' their audience: they can bite the hand that feeds their regular diet of stories through critical coverage or exposure of the negative consequences of policies, in order to inform and, ultimately, entertain the wider public on whom their survival depends. Media professionals can make mischief for members of any other group

with an interest in education; not all splashes across the front page of the national newspapers are necessarily good ones from their perspective. Through selective attention and the potential to offer positive or negative coverage, the media help, therefore, to empower or to disempower other groups, so contributing to the strength or weakness of their power base.

Media professionals' autonomy in respect of their frequent sources is constrained by their fundamental dependence: no source, no story. Since those centrally involved in education policy generation constitute a key source of information for media professionals working in this area, journalists and programme makers also need to retain cooperation of their most valued sources. The credibility of journalists and programme makers with their audience, and therefore their job, depends partly on how far they can demonstrate that they have access to the hub of the policy action. The sometimes cosy, sometimes turbulent relationship between media professionals and politicians is well summarised by Blumler and Gurevitch (1981) as one characterised by 'mutual dependence within a framework of divergent yet overlapping purposes'.

This relationship extends to representatives of education professionals who also court positive media coverage in their bid to influence education policy. Consequently, the relationship between media professionals and their most frequent sources is mercurial. It may be typified as 'symbiosis' where their interests coincide and the outcome of interaction is synergistic, leading to mutual benefit. Alternatively, it may be labelled as 'mutual parasitism' where each partner attempts to achieve its own incompatible interest at the expense of the other. The metaphor of the media as a 'loose cannon' captures how media professionals have relative independence from sources connected with education policy and may give positive or negative coverage within limits imposed by their ultimate dependence on key sources.

As a result, neither potential sources nor media professionals have exclusive and directive control over media presentation of education policy related issues. Some events are accorded media priority, others are excluded; some sources receive consistent media attention while others are ignored, reflecting the implicit understanding of media professionals about relationships of power among different source groups. The mass media therefore affect which education policy related messages are conveyed, how far these messages reflect the intentions of their originators, the potential sources whose voices are heard and those who are ignored, and the degree to which coverage is positive or critical towards particular sources (Wallace 1996).

Bailey's (1977) notion of competing 'myths' is employed to conceptualise how different groups attempt to influence public opinion through the media by creating their preferred myth while bringing opposing myths into derision. Media professionals also influence the creation of myths, supporting or challenging the myths put forward by sources depending on their news and related values. He defines myth as 'an oversimplified representation of a more complex reality'. Myths and their opposing 'counter-myths' are the currency for advancing one view in the face of an opposing perspective. The more public the debate, suggested Bailey, the simpler and less reconcilable become the myths and counter myths. They have ideological import in that they represent a partial account which tends to favour the interests of a particular group in society.

The National Media in Britain

The legal framework governing media operation affects the way education policy related issues are presented. The British laws of press ownership allow for explicit political allegiance which, until the general election of May 1997, was mostly to the Conservative Party, and also for criticism of politicians in government and in opposition, and of other public figures. On the other hand television and radio are required by law to be politically impartial. This rule is widely interpreted as meaning that a balance must be struck between opposing views though, in practice, restrictions are usually placed on the number of perspectives represented.

The national media organisations relating most comprehensively to education policy are a mix of privately owned companies and BBC services. Four television channels transmit nationwide: two belong to the BBC, funded through a licence fee; two are commercial, funded

through advertising. BBC Radio 4 is the premier national radio station for political affairs. The most widely read national press consists of ten daily newspapers, most with a weekly (Sunday) stablemate. The five (six at the time of the fieldwork) more downmarket 'tabloid' newspapers have the highest circulation and carry more human interest and less directly policy linked material (like stories about naughty teachers being caught having sex in the classroom stock cupboard) than the more upmarket 'quality' or 'broadsheet' papers. Each of the quality daily newspapers includes a weekly specialist education section, and one produces two weekly education supplements: one covers schools and further education, the other caters for higher education. Supplementing these media operations are news services on a fifth terrestrial television channel, several satellite and cable television channels, various national and local radio stations, and specialist education magazines and journals which including those produced by teacher unions and academics.

The education policy linked output of these media takes several forms, the most prevalent being news coverage with a major focus on central government policies and politicians. Political opinion about education policy issues arising in the news is made in the 'leader' articles of newspapers. The stream of news output is complemented by more specialised magazine programmes and feature articles addressing a wider range of education topics, which may be less closely linked to policy changes of the day. Current affairs programmes regularly take an education issue as their topic, and education policy related coverage also appears sporadically in such diverse media as household magazines and television food programmes. This wider diversity of output may stimulate education debate as much as covering issues already in the news domain.

National media output reaches a very large audience. Around 97% of British households have a television set and 80% take a daily newspaper, with 75-85% of all adults seeing a national paper. On average, newspaper readers spend about 45 minutes each day on their habit, and television viewers 3.5 hours (Newton 1993). As about a fifth of television programming consists of news and current affairs, it is probable that a substantial amount is being watched. According to one survey of voters, 63% regarded television as the most important, 29% favoured newspapers, and 4% looked to radio (Dunleavy and Husbands 1985). Output relating to education is of significance for perhaps 10-15 million people in the UK: parents with children who are being formally educated; an expanding number of students aged 18 or over who are also voters; and a sizable cadre of teachers, lecturers, academics, administrators and politicians responsible for provision of education.

There is strong differentiation amongst media audiences, members of elite groups most closely linked with policy making relying on quality newspapers and Radio 4, especially the early morning 'Today' programme. A high proportion of education professionals read specialist quality newspaper education sections and supplements. Although newspapers and radio may not be viewed as the most important sources of political information by the public at large, these media have much greater significance for the policy elite, including frequent sources, and for the more politically active parents from middle class backgrounds, than the overall number of their readers and listeners would suggest.

Despite the technological differences between broadcasting and print media, the structures of the major media organisations involved with selection of material and production of education policy related output have many similarities. The front line media professionals who collect material and develop the story are mostly journalists. Their orientation towards education policy is linked with their job brief. The quality papers, the education supplements and the BBC employ specialist education editors and correspondents. They and other media organisations also employ political journalists who may cover education policy issues. Half the tabloid papers employ a single education correspondent, while the remainder rely on political journalists and general reporters.

There is some form of internal market for material in all these organisations, most starkly in relation to news. Journalists produce their copy or item whose competitive strength against other kinds of story is reviewed by editors. The latter decide according to their news values whether a story should be included and, if so, at what length and in how prominent a position in the output. News journalists are under constant pressure to deliver stories that will make

the paper or broadcast in competition against colleagues, especially on days where there is plenty of news. The apogee of their efforts is to make a 'splash' on the front page of their newspaper or produce the lead item for the broadcast news. Competition varies with the flow of material that accords with the dominant news values in the organisation: on slack days, stories with a lower newsworthiness rating will be used.

The production of output is also a team effort, with a chain of involvement by production specialists. Newspaper journalists' copy is trimmed to length by subeditors, who also write the headline. Television journalists need a camera and sound recording crew to collect material. They have to make a case to editors for the use of crews, in competition with colleagues. They work with picture editors and producers to edit material gathered to the sequence and length required. The professional values of each contributor play a part in the output: whether a subeditor deciding what should be cut from copy, or a camera operator wishing to promote the intrinsic visual value of material filmed ostensibly to back a television story.

There are media based sources for news stories, most notably a service provided by the Press Agency which is bought by these media organisations. The Press Agency's own reporters produce frequently updated stories which are distributed by computer link to other media organisations buying the service. Other media based sources include journalists for local media and 'stringers', freelance reporters who sell their stories on. A key source for national media is their own combined output, which is monitored continually. National newspaper organisations buy the latest editions of all the national newspapers, which are made readily available to editors and journalists so that they can monitor the competition.

Interaction between Media Professionals and Frequent Sources

Media Professionals

The journalists and programme makers who were interviewed indicated that what brought them into contact with particular frequent (and less regularly used) sources was the common media professionals' interest in gathering suitable material for the output they were employed to create. The detailed expression of this interest varied with individuals' values reflecting their personal, occupational and organisational contexts.

First, awareness differed of the news values governing their judgement about whether an education policy related issue was worth reporting, most interviewees highlighting how their intuition had been honed through their experience as journalists. All were well established in their career, having been promoted from other organisations such as local newspapers. One broadcasting journalist referred to a definition adopted in BBC training: news had to be 'new, true, important and interesting'. Another said simply, 'It's very much gut reaction, what you think is controversial.'

Second, their nose for news depended on their job brief and expertise. A politician from a party in opposition to central government reflected that:

> You've got the difference between the political correspondents who want to cover education, who want to cover the rows - external and internal - and the educationalists, who want to know, say, the details of how you will change the post-16 qualifications. Whereas the political ones would want to know whether you were arguing about it.

Third, a minority of journalists expressed a linked concern not to be caught out by failing to cover a story or adopt an angle taken by journalists elsewhere. A politician reflected:

> What you do find is that the education press - probably most subject presses are pretty tight - they hunt as a pack. And they don't want to miss what the other one has got. So either they're all going to be interested or not many. But then, even saying that, there are always one or two who would want good education stories regardless.

Fourth, all had a strong but impressionistic sense of their projected audience and the different market niches to which media output was directed. The evidence on which most drew was

piecemeal, relying on feedback from the audience, but data was available on ratings for broadcasts and some quality papers had undertaken readership surveys. They were equally concerned with the need to entertain this putative audience. One education specialist noted:

> You have to keep remembering, first of all, that newspapers are a branch of show business, and if you forget that you become boring. But the second thing is that, for most of your readers, something that you know and is old hat is likely to come like a bolt from the blue - you've got to keep your reactions fresh.

A journalist working for an education supplement was precise about the paper's market niche: 'Our main function is to write a paper that teachers will be prepared to buy and read.' The market for this supplement was tied commercially to advertising of teaching jobs, training opportunities and resources, which represented some 60% of income. This commercial value illustrates how relative is the autonomy of the media concerned with education policy from the economy. On the one hand, editorial content must contribute to the virtuous circle whereby it was interesting to teachers so the paper would continue to attract advertising targeted at them, suggesting an element of mutual dependence. On the other, a strong measure of autonomy was maintained between commercial and editorial concerns. Liaison between journalists and their colleagues who handled advertising was limited to giving the latter advance information about broad topics to be covered. The journalist stated:

> We have an absolute, strict policy that we are not influenced by the advertising...We obviously have to walk a line. We have to keep faith with our readers and we have to keep faith with the advertisers. But from an editorial perspective, we're mostly concerned with keeping faith with the readers.

Fifth, part of journalists' professional code was that their first duty was to operate within the editorial policy of their media organisation, irrespective of their own political or educational values. Most specialists working for quality papers either wrote or informed the writing of leader articles from time to time. Among these journalists, leaders were perceived to be the least widely read, but most politically influential aspect of their output. One education specialist commented: 'If I was told to write an editorial taking a line that I didn't personally agree with, I'd simply write the editorial - and I often do. I often have no view on it at all, or don't know what I think.'

Sixth, a high priority for journalists working for those media organisations targeting parents, especially the popular magazine broadcasts and high circulation tabloid papers, was to entertain their non-specialist mass audience, and they were aware that parents' interests might conflict with those of teachers. The education specialist for a tabloid paper pointed to the imperative to simplify for an audience whose loyalty to the paper was contingent on being kept interested, consistent with Bailey's (1977) view that the larger the audience, the simpler the myth: 'If you don't simplify, then the issues actually become too difficult for people to bother on average to make the effort to look into and understand...you can't qualify everything all of the time.'

Seventh, the journalists' professional code meant following editors' orders. Personal party political values were not a prime motivator even for most newspaper journalists. Two working for papers which generally supported the Conservative Party mentioned that they did not vote Conservative but accepted their brief. Newspaper journalists also perceived that they had formal autonomy from any political party that it might be editorial policy generally to favour. The education specialist for one quality paper which strongly supported the Conservative Party (the party of central government at the time) indicated how a degree of autonomy was retained by media professionals: 'The [newspaper], and my editor in particular, are regarded in Tory [Conservative] circles as a loose cannon. And that's true of the paper's attitude to the Tory Party generally...If I were to write a leader castigating government policy, my editor wouldn't find that a problem.'

Finally, journalists and programme makers were aware that their personal values had a minor part to play, especially for those experiencing parenthood whose children were being educated in the state school system and going on to higher education. A tabloid paper education

specialist noted how his reaction against aspects of his own childhood experience of primary schooling had informed his choice of stories to develop.

Frequent Sources

We will now consider what frequent sources who operated nationally wanted from the media, concentrating on politicians from central government and parties in opposition with an education brief, teacher union representatives, and academics from university education departments. They also had a common, double-edged interest: to secure wide coverage that depicted their policy related views in a positive light (which might include criticism of their opponents) on behalf of the group they represented or, in the case of academics, as individuals; and to avoid negative coverage that could damage their cause in the eyes of the media audience. Expression of this interest varied according to sources' political or professional allegiances and organisational context. Obviously, the content of what was advocated or criticised differed widely. In addition, the groups were unequally positioned in terms of power and resources, contributing to the oligarchic tendency of media output where some sources typically received more coverage than others.

First, members of each group were differently located in the formal hierarchy of political power. Central government ministers were top dogs, principally concerned with announcing their policy changes, gaining public acceptance for them, and testing public reaction to potential policy developments. A minor focus was to promote negative coverage of any group which opposed them, whether politician, education professional or otherwise. For education spokespersons of the two major parties in opposition, priorities for coverage were reversed: they were principally concerned with criticising central government education policy and presenting alternatives. They wished both to influence present central government policy and to win votes and gain public acceptance for developments that might be initiated by their party if it were elected to form a future government. Teacher union representatives were more narrowly concerned to further the professional interests of their members and to support or criticise central government policy according to its impact on these sectional interests. Academics acted as individuals, one consciously championing teachers whom he felt were not in a position to articulate their concerns in the national media.

Second, they enjoyed sharply contrasting levels of back-up in seeking to achieve their interest, most significantly in the form of specialist support from professional media officers and associated technology for gathering and disseminating information. Central government ministers had by far the most extensive support, mainly in the shape of the dedicated service provided by the DFE Information Branch, a sophisticated publicity machine staffed by civil servants with media expertise, several of whom had previously been media professionals.

The DFE, as one of over 20 central government departments, was also linked with the Central Office of Information, enabling media officers for each department to coordinate their work and so avoid clashes between announcements which would rob one or other of some media attention. Political parties in opposition were considerably less well off. Each party had a central media office, but resources were not sufficient for education spokespersons to have their own media officer. Consequently much of this work was done by the politicians themselves or by their assistants. The larger teacher unions employed a media officer, but representatives from the smaller ones and academics worked largely alone.

Third, these groups varied in the emphasis they placed on monitoring their performance relative to each other in seeking to influence education policy. Some attended to the output of media professionals and more direct indicators of public opinion like published letters to newspaper editors and the results of surveys and opinion polls. Monitoring of this kind was an integral part of the work of politicians. Central government ministers were particularly concerned to respond in the light of this flow of monitoring information. Each morning, media officers presented ministers with a digest of the last 24 hours' media output, including a weighty set of newspaper cuttings. Members of other groups, who gained less frequent coverage than central government overall, monitored their performance (with fewer resources to do so), mainly through press cuttings.

Media professionals and frequent sources adopted varying strategies for realising their respective interests. Some were public and official, while others took place outside the public domain and might not be officially sanctioned, though widely regarded by those involved as legitimate modes of operation. Secrecy was significant a part of interaction between media professionals and frequent sources, as in the rest of British politics (Newton 1993). Mutual dependence led members of both groups to work on developing and sustaining a generally cooperative relationship which included media officers, where employed. This background familiarity, with its formal and informal arrangements for ready and rapid communication, constituted the platform for interaction in the search by media professionals for material and the concern of frequent sources for publicity on specific issues. It was achieved in several ways.

First, there was regular and routine interaction, stimulated in part by the steady stream of media releases, pre-release informal briefings and more formal media conferences coming from the offices of the most frequent sources. Media professionals and frequent sources alike were familiar with the highly predictable diary of annual education events like union conferences or announcement of the central government budget statement which could be expected to offer material for media coverage.

Second, more personal means of contact were widely developed, whether official, as in the case of media office or media professionals' office phone and fax numbers, or unofficial, as where frequent sources and their favoured media professionals would exchange home phone numbers. Efforts were made to get to know each other, particularly through informal meetings. One politician gave priority to building cordial personal relationships:

> I will spend time getting to know journalists, individual journalists, and having lunch with them or a drink with them or whatever, just to keep the channels of communication open so that we are on a good, friendly footing. And they know where I'm coming from.

Third, individuals made considerable efforts always to be accessible, one politician noting how urgent it could be to make a quick response: 'If it's a big story you drop, you rearrange, you divert to the nearest television studio.' Media officers, where employed, acted as intermediaries to facilitate contact where they perceived it would be in the employers' interest. A rule of thumb at the DFE media office was 'phones come first.' The head of the Information Branch was entitled to contact or see ministers at any time if he judged that a response to media professionals was desirable.

Some media professionals developed social contacts with politicians through which they could gather information 'off the record', especially from those whose constituency - the area they represented as a member of parliament (MP) - was in London, where most media professionals resided who operated nationally. The traffic in off the record information was not all one way. Frequent sources' knowledge about the latest developments in policy making activity depended on how close they were to the action. An opposition party politician claimed: 'If you rely on that for tipping you off then you're too late.' Members of other groups had more need of inside information which media professionals could sometimes provide. A union representative stated noted how media professionals 'get briefed by ministers, they get leaks, and sometimes they are closer to the centre of power than we are.'

Fourth, for media professionals and frequent sources alike, a corollory of gaining privileged access to confidential information was the advisability of protecting the identity of informants. An education specialist for a quality paper took a strong stand: 'I've always had an absolute priority that you protect the people who are giving you information. And, touch wood, I don't think anybody ever got into trouble through telling me something.'

Strategies of Frequent Sources

The upshot of media professionals and frequent sources developing a personal relationship was to facilitate interaction so members of each group could get what they wanted. Within this framework of familiarity, some frequent sources employed strategies to maximise the chance of their messages being transmitted by media professionals. First, certain among them, especially those party to confidential information which media professionals would consider newsworthy, leaked information in the hope that it would be publicised to their advantage. Central government ministers, reportedly, were particularly prone to leak because they were continually formulating education policy changes, apparently often giving selected journalists an off the record briefing whereby they could put forward a proposal without attribution or public commitment.

A media officer at the DFE admitted that 'you do get leaks, sometimes accidental, sometimes by design.' He pointed to the fact that policy making involved a range of people with whom information was shared, any of whom could potentially pass it on. At the DFE - with its 2,500 staff - as with the smaller organisations of other key source groups, great efforts were made to minimise the occurrence of leaks that were not sanctioned by those responsible for dealing with the media. DFE employees were expected to route all media contact through the Information Branch, so that a united front the media could be maintained.

Second, frequent sources had become adept at packaging what they had to communicate to make it as usable as possible for media professionals - what an ex-civil servant regarded as the trend towards a 'soundbite generation'. A teacher union representative argued that, 'You've got to be able to express yourself in colourful language, or slightly exaggerate a problem, or otherwise you just say boring things and you're not going to get much press coverage.' Equally, it was important to avoid the temptation to qualify what was stated for the sake of accuracy because 'if you're going to qualify everything you will qualify out of the [newspaper] column space.' Being prepared to meet media professionals' demand for simplicity and certainty therefore contributed to the creation of output taking the form of more or less simplistic myths and counter-myths.

Third, frequent sources had developed techniques, whether through training or experience, for achieving their interest when interacting with media professionals. One academic noted how editing of pre-recorded programmes gave media professionals the upper hand in selecting how points he made would be framed. He had noticed how politicians often had the last word in such programmes by stalling on when they could be interviewed until the last moment, when it would be too late for the programme to be re-edited before transmission.

Media officers were well versed in how to time positive announcements to maximise coverage, checking the diary of education and other political events to ensure that there would not be competition from other happenings. Equally, negative announcements could be slipped out on a Friday, in the knowledge that Saturday newspapers were less well read than on other days. Even here, the independence of media professionals meant that the strategy could backfire as the story angle they chose could be to highlight why it was announced in this way.

Interaction between Media Professionals and Frequent Sources

Media professionals and frequent sources come together to serve their interests in what may usefully be characterised as a 'marriage of convenience': they are mutually dependent, each needing the other to realise their own interest. Where they develop a close and symbiotic relationship it rests on media professionals proving to be trustworthy in helping frequent sources to gain positive coverage, and on frequent sources proving to be a reliable source of stories and soundbites, helping media professionals to entertain and so directly or indirectly take money off their non-captive audience.

Yet each group also has a measure of independence, enabling members to manipulate the interaction, parasitically, to their own advantage at the expense of their partner group, especially where their respective interests do not coincide. The result is media output which does vary, but only within the limits imposed by the need to generate myths and counter-

myths. The marriage is often happy but it can also be stormy, even leading to divorce (where a frequent source is the loser).

Two reasons for the divergence of interests are, first, that bad news for frequent sources falls within the compass of news values which represent good news for media professionals because their licence to thrill their audience includes exposing frequent sources' hypocrisy or foolishness and internal conflict within their organisation. The emphasis of frequent sources in presenting a united front to media professionals was born of hard experience of communication about internal differences - 'leaks and rows' - being exploited in media output. Second, much education policy related activity of frequent sources is important for the life chances of the media audience but also complex so not meriting media attention. Education policies can be less attractive to media professionals than the personalities associated with them, because personality stories are more easily understood by the mass audience.

Let us examine several examples of interaction which illustrate the inherent instability of the media professional-frequent source marriage. First, even a cursory glance at media output reveals how symbiotic the marriage can be when it is mutually convenient. Central government ministers and media professionals did very well out of each other most of the time. Of the television news items recorded throughout 1994, the large majority related to central government education policies, most reporting ministers' announcements. On the early morning Today programme on Radio 4, the opening line was frequently on the lines of: 'The minister will announce today that...' indicating that media officers at the DFE had done their work well to brief journalists before the announcement was actually made.

Second, there was also symbiosis over the publication of 'league tables' of school students' national test scores. One education specialist had compiled a league table of independent schools' examination results and subsequently developing a comparative table which included state schools. The positive reaction of parents was noted by central government ministers, who arranged for computer disks of the raw scores from state schools to be made available to media professionals. Different newspapers published their own version. There was a confluence of interests in that the newspapers paid willingly for what would have been a very expensive dissemination exercise for central government but suited their media professionals' interest in keeping up circulation by providing what their readers wanted.

Third, symbiosis might occur between source groups and media professionals, with the media acting as broker. A union representative reported how messages could be conveyed through the media to indicate to central government ministers that union leaders were ready for behind the scenes contact of which few people, even in the DFE, would be aware: 'You use the media to lay the ground and the circumstances for subsequent non-publicised negotiation.' When the secretary of state had declared an interest in nursery education, union representatives had welcomed this announcement, so demonstrating that the union was not, in principle, hostile to this policy and paving the way for contact in the private arena.

Fourth, marriage difficulties could also surface. A television programme maker decided to do a story which was critical of a teacher union representative, resulting in refusal by this person to talk to him again. He also ran a story on the poor physical state of much of the school building stock and the link with reduced central government spending on state education. When a camera crew and journalist visited the DFE, recently rehoused in a newly refurbished building, they gave the slip to the media officers escorting them by visiting the toilets, then filmed these smart new facilities. This material was used as contrast with footage of very dilapidated school toilets in questioning central government spending priorities - to the irritation of media officers, who had been outmanoeuvred.

Fifth, newspaper journalists covering a major education conference had decided that they had not obtained anything newsworthy. Hunting as a pack, they sought out an archbishop attending the conference. They provoked him into saying something contentious and therefore quotable about religious education. Their interest in filing a story that would meet their editors' criteria of newsworthiness led them to 'manufacture' a newsworthy incident which had not been wittingly initiated by their source.

Sixth, a marriage break-up was triggered by the outspoken behaviour of the secretary of state at a fringe group meeting during the annual Conservative Party conference. He had frequently refused to meet journalists in the past, giving rise to some resentment among media professionals. This meeting was scheduled to be held at a venue from which people other than the party faithful were barred, but the venue had to be changed and the meeting was infiltrated by a leading member of a pressure group set up to oppose a particular central government policy. This person taped the secretary of state's remarks about a local education authority officer in his constituency, whom he called a 'nutter', claiming that he feared for local children when this person roamed the streets at night. The pressure group member informed the local education authority officer, who then went public on his decision to sue the secretary of state.

Media professionals quickly dubbed the incident 'the nuttergate affair'. According to one education specialist, the secretary of state's behaviour lay outside the values of 'decency' shared by media professionals, so they decided to go for him by making a splash on this story. Media activity against the interest of the secretary of state and central government was parasitic; the same reporting was symbiotic in serving the interest of the 'nutter' - the local education authority officer - and the political parties in opposition. The secretary of state decided to settle out of court. The settlement was heavily featured in the national news a few days before a central government cabinet reshuffle at which he lost his cabinet post. Media accounts linked his fate closely with the embarrassment caused to central government by nuttergate.

Finally, the marriage could also survive difficult times and subsequently prosper. The leader of the main opposition party let it be known that he was using his entitlement as a parent to send his son to a grant maintained school, which he was able to do as a result of central government reforms he had rejected till now. Media accounts focused on the hypocrisy of a politician acting in a way which was contrary to stated party policy. The leader was steadfast, and softened the party line, via the media, against these schools. Three years later, he is prime minister after a landslide victory in the general election of 1997. 'New' Labour policy is to alter, but not abolish, the parameters for parental choice of school. Speculatively, his move may have been designed to signal to middle class parents who were most concerned about having choice of schooling that party policy was moving in their direction. He may have outmanoeuvred the media in the longer term, despite giving them fodder for critical coverage at the time.

Conclusion

These findings illustrate how enduring marriage tensions exist between media professionals and their more frequent education policy related sources, resulting in interaction which varies from the symbiotic, in the domain where both partners' interests overlap, to the mutually parasitic, in the area of incompatibility between them. The marriage is held together by the partners' bottom line mutual dependence, though their partial independence may give rise to a temporary separation or, exceptionally, divorce. (Here any outgoing individual is immediately replaced by another from the same major group.) The areas of difference and overlap between the interests of media professionals and frequent sources are modelled in Figure 1.

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

Symbiotic interaction occurs where both partners pursue the element of their group interest within the area of overlap. Parasitic interaction occurs where one partner pursues some portion of the group interest which is not compatible with that of the other partner. It can become mutual where the response of the latter partner is to pursue an equally incompatible part of that group's interest. Where frequent sources receive negative coverage, they may retaliate by denying media access for a time (as happened when the film maker was critical of a union representative). Where media professionals are denied access to favoured sources, they may react by going for negative stories to discredit them (as in the nuttergate affair).

This surface pattern of interaction may be explained in terms of underlying structural forces as manifesting the relationship of relative autonomy between the media, education, the state and

the economy. To the extent that media professionals enjoy independence from their education policy related sources, they can decide what messages to convey about education issues. This contribution to the education policy process is nevertheless limited by constraints on media freedom imposed by dependence on these sources for material and sometimes as part of their audience. Output is moulded by editorial policy reflecting ownership of the press and much of broadcasting by a small number of multinational companies which exist to make money; by the state imposed legal framework which sets boundaries on what may be written or broadcast; and by the imperative to entertain a mass audience in order directly or indirectly (in the case of the BBC) to secure income.

The marriage of convenience which leads to education policy related media output seems rather unhealthy, arguably maintained at a considerable cost for the quality of education policy. Insofar as we mostly live in second hand worlds, whose views are represented in the media debate has consequences for the range of policy options considered. The oligarchic tendency in media attention produces a hierarchy of output, where interests from the political centre achieve nearly all the coverage; more radical (especially left wing) voices are rarely heard. Further, the depth of the coverage we do receive also affects the quality of debate. Maybe, as members of the media audience, we are partly to blame for the pressure felt by media professionals and sources alike to communicate in simplistic myths, dumbing down output for easy ingestion in soundbite-sized chunks and avoiding the more complex issues. Last but not least, the insatiable media interest in central government may have compromised the quality of central government education policy making for the sake of media coverage. According to an ex-civil servant, there was increasing emphasis among ministers on sustaining a high media profile, their concern for frequent announcements undermining their ability to work more strategically on long term reform policies:

> It's oddly enough not media management in the sense that they might like to think ofit - they being ministers - but is actually management of ministers by the media. But they didn't realise it. In other words there's a reactive, rather than a proactive, tendency.

What is good news for the media may not be such good news for education, but at least it keeps us entertained!

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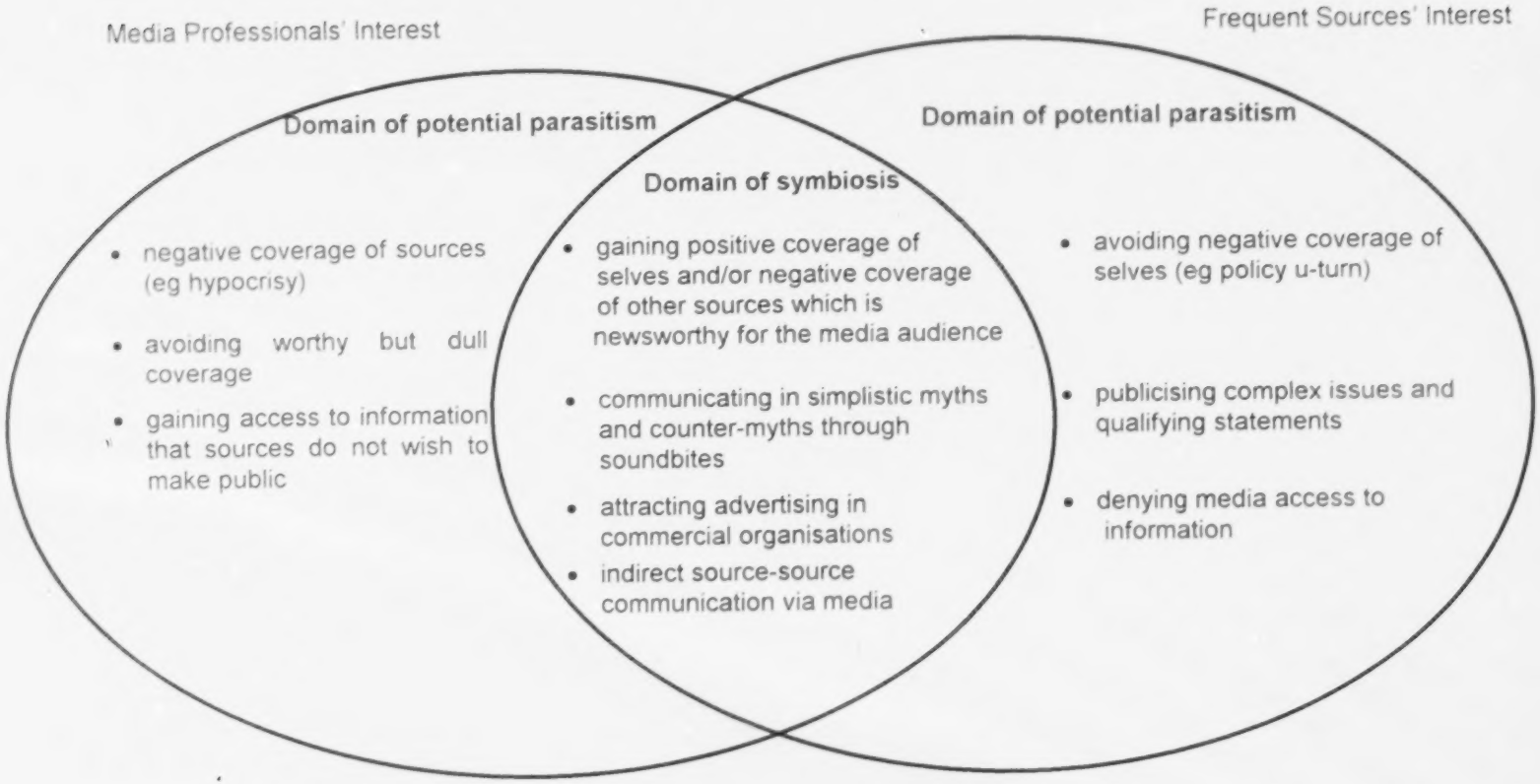
Figure 1: Interaction between media professionals and frequent sources


Media Professionals' Interest
Frequent Sources' Interest
Domain of potential parasitism
Domain of symbiosis
Domain of potential parasitism
• negative coverage of sources (eg hypocrisy)
• avoiding worthy but dull coverage
• gaining access to information that sources do not wish to make public
• gaining positive coverage of selves and/or negative coverage of other sources which is newsworthy for the media audience
• communicating in simplistic myths and counter-myths through soundbites
• attracting advertising in commercial organisations
• indirect source-source communication via media
• avoiding negative coverage of selves (eg policy u-turn)
• publicising complex issues and qualifying statements
• denying media access to information